

“Nayles Large and Lang”: Masculine Identity and the Anachronic Object in the York *Crucifixion* Play

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Are people finding fault with your carpentry? Do you keep drilling holes in the wrong places and losing your hammer? Are your nails too short to do a decent job? The York pinners cater for every home improvement project, as well as more niche orders. This is your chance to buy nails so large and long that they might have been used to crucify Christ! As seen in the Corpus Christi pageants, these nails are up to any task and can bear the weight of a fully grown man. One previous user . . .

EVEN FOR THE MOST enthusiastic DIY aficionado, a performance of the death of Christ might be considered a rather inappropriate venue for commercial product placement. Nevertheless, the late medieval York *Crucifixion* play appears to come perilously close to doing just that. Although the *Crucifixion* occupied the theological center of a series of pageants performed during the celebration of Corpus Christi, the body of Christ is out of sight for much of the play. As Greg Walker has noted, during much of the play's action, Christ's body lies prone and silent on the stage, obscured by the antics of the soldiers carrying out the crucifixion.¹ These soldiers are chiefly concerned with the mechanics of their task—the engineering challenges the crucifixion poses and the tools employed to carry it out. As a consequence, the soldiers' mechanical preoccupations displace the audience's attention from the body undergoing the suffering of the crucifixion to the tools used to perform the work. Yet the tools used during the York *Crucifixion*—particularly the “nayles large and lange”—also work to project the identity of the guild producing the

1. See Greg Walker, “Medieval Drama: the Corpus Christi in York and Croxton,” in *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. David Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 375.

pageant.² Just as the York shipwrights used the play *The Building of the Ark* to demonstrate their skill and knowledge of boat building and the bakers found themselves eminently well-placed to produce the bread for *The Last Supper*, so the pinners' guild, which made metal pegs for wood joining, found a reference to their craft in the play of the crucifixion.

As Janet Hill has noted, the assignation of guilds to plays held practical as well as poetic considerations; after all, certain guilds were appropriately equipped to provide the properties and scenery materials demanded by the biblical narratives being performed.³ However, the nails used in the pinners' *Crucifixion* operate somewhat differently from the shipwrights' ark or the bakers' bread. While they undoubtedly act as referents to the trade of the play's producers and performers, the nails also accrue temporal referents that link the pinners' play to a variety of biblical, medieval, and iconographical contexts. This leaves the nails open to multiple readings—readings which call into question the various masculine identities of the soldiers who wield them. Through the play, the nails are used as noble weapons; as sturdy, saleable goods; as tools of creation (and mis-creation); and as objects of devotion and torture. They therefore have the curious ability to belong to several historical moments at once. As a consequence, the York soldiers may be read as knights, as civic authorities and guildsmen, and as the New Testament torturers and murderers of Christ so often presented as “Jewish” in medieval iconography.

Criticism concerning the York *Crucifixion* has paid much attention to the complex relationships between biblical and medieval times—most particularly in relation to Christ's address to his audience, which appears to collapse pageant, biblical, and street times into one moment. For example, Isabel Davis has recently identified the topological properties of Christ's quotation from the book of Lamentations when he begins “Ye that pasen by þe Weiye” as being a means of bringing historical moments of suffering from both Old and New Testaments into the immediate

2. Richard Beadle, ed., “The Crucifixion,” in *The York Plays*, York Medieval Texts, 2nd ser. (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), line 30. Subsequent citations by line number in text.

3. Janet Hill, *Stages and Playgoers: From Guild Plays to Shakespeare* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 2002), 24–26.

present of a late medieval audience.⁴ However, while the speech of the York Christ does hold the ability to stretch between moments in time, I argue that the nails used in the *Crucifixion* also engage in questions of temporality, being able to accrue temporal meanings and move *beyond* linear time. This article therefore examines what happens when we apply questions of temporality to the objects that define, produce and embody the pinners' *Crucifixion*—the nails themselves—and what consequences this holds for the play's projection of the characters' relationships with them. In doing so, it argues that the nails' ability to become repositories of meaning simultaneously engages with a number of models of masculinity through first, their association with the *arma Christi* and Christological knighthood; second, their role in the late medieval pinners' trade; and finally, as biblical implements of torture.

Part of what makes the pinners' nails so temporally interesting is the fact that, while being religiously symbolic objects, they also bear a number of secular associations which not only look back to former times or ideologies but also hold implications for the future. The nail holds a curiously timeless quality which transcends the Christian narrative in which it appears. As a tool, the nail joined wood together for many centuries before it was employed to attach a Jewish miscreant to a cross. Likewise, the nails produced by the medieval pinners guild were used, apparently free of Christological associations, in the everyday building and carpentry work of medieval York. Moreover, the nail was no doubt expected to continue to be used for such purposes long after the performance of the York *Crucifixion*. The nail is therefore an object that is at once sacred and secular; mundane and wondrous, secured within certain, loaded points of Christian history and operating independently of it. The ability of certain objects and works of art to work across histories and contexts has given rise to Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood's theories concerning the concept of "anachronic" objects. Moving away from models of time which view history as linear, Nagel and Wood define objects which have a more flexible relationship with time as anachronic, a word "from the Greek *anachronizein*, built from *ana*-,

4. See Isabel Davis, "'Ye that pasen by þe Weiye': Time, Topology, and the Medieval Use of Lamentations 1.2," *Textual Practice* 25, no.3 (2011), 437-72, 10.1080/0950236X.2011.561259.

‘again,’ and the verb *chronizein*, ‘to be late or belated.’”⁵ This differs from V. A. Kolve’s perception of dramatic anachronisms as those which “collapse” the past into the present and those which imagine similarities in order to make the biblical past relevant to a medieval audience.⁶ Rather, Nagel and Wood deny the assumption carried by the term “anachronistic” that every event and object has a fixed location within linear time, noting that “the anachronic artefact also moves freely in time, but unlike the anachronistic artefact, it does not depend for its effect on a stable conception of the historicity of form.”⁷ Occupying no definitive place in linear historical time, such objects have a repetitive quality that is able to hint at ideas beyond their own present existence: “The work of art when it is late, when it repeats, when it hesitates, when it remembers, but also when it projects a future of an ideal, is ‘anachronic.’”⁸ As we shall see, a nail may be *either* a nail that crucified the savior *or* a late medieval tool *or* a stage property *or* an emblem of political discontent *and* all these at once.

Although they perform as Christ’s nails for the duration of the play, the nails of the York *Crucifixion* are not, therefore, relics (that is, objects whose value is based in their link to a specific time and place)—and are therefore different from the nails appearing in iconographic or reliquary contexts. The ability of the *Crucifixion* nails to “anachronize” lies instead in their simultaneously symbolic, yet mundane nature. In this sense, they operate according to Nagel and Wood’s idea of “substitutional” anachronic performance: “To perceive an artefact in substitutional terms was to understand it as belonging to more than one historical moment simultaneously.”⁹ The nails used on the pageant wagon of late medieval York are made in the present or recent past and yet used as if contemporary objects in a much older narrative. As a consequence, despite the “newness” of the York nails, they nevertheless command some properties

5. Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2010), 13.

6. See V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (London: Edward Arnold, 1966), 102–6.

7. Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, 14.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, 30.

of religious matter. For example, Caroline Walker Bynum's recent study has pointed to the dichotomy of holy objects as remaining both changeless (like the figure of the nail throughout history) and open to change. She notes that such objects hold the potential to be dangerous because they hold the ability to transform: "Behind both the enthusiasm for material change and the hostility to it lay a keen sense that matter is powerful, hence dangerous, because transformative and transformed."¹⁰ In the following pages, I argue that it is the anachronic nature of the York nails that drives their transformative properties. Due to the nails' ability to hint at ideas beyond their own existence, coupled with the York soldiers' own characterizations of the tools, the nails change those with whom they come into contact. The nails' state of belonging to several historical moments at once means that they both construct and complicate the identities of those who use them. I contend that this contributes a particularly gendered force within the play as the nails dismantle the various masculine identities assumed by the characters who carry them—as knights and soldiers, as guildsmen, and as Christ's torturers—even as they appear to point towards them. In this sense, the nails perform as disruptive agents within the play—capable of unmaking the soldiers' performances of masculine roles even in the very process of their construction.

The soldiers' need to frame their actions within a particular kind of masculine behavior is evident from the very first lines of the play. The opening speeches of the soldiers in the York *Crucifixion* identify with a model of militant, chivalric masculinity, which establishes certain expectations concerning their deeds and the tools they will use to accomplish them. As the four soldiers enter, the first addresses his companions:

I MILES Sir knyghtis, take heede hydir in hye,
 This dede on dergh we may noght drawe.
 3ee wootte youreselffe als wele as I
 Howe lordis and leders of owre lawe
 Has geven dome þat þis doote schall dye.
 (1-5)

10. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Culture* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2011), 25.

The self-applied title of “knight” seems strangely inappropriate for characters tasked with crucifying Christ, particularly when medieval courtly and literary traditions based knightly behavior upon complex codes encompassing faith, martial action, political loyalty, and chivalry. As Ruth Mazo Karras has argued, knightly identity was inherently fragile and required repeated performance in order to be maintained.¹¹ This becomes doubly troublesome when those aspiring to the title of “knight” are engaged in the ultimate ignoble act: theirs is an act against faith, chivalry, and martial action since it is carried out against the passive body of Christ.

Indeed, the title “knight” is often ironically applied to antagonistic, evil, or morally base characters appearing in late medieval religious drama. For example, in the York play *The Slaughter of the Innocents*, both Herod and his counselors refer to the soldiers sent to carry out the murder of children as knights. Moreover, Herod’s speech associates the action with a courteous courtly ethic when he addresses his soldiers “Syr knyghtis, curtayse and hende.”¹² As a consequence, Herod appears to be framing his decidedly unchivalrous commands—the murder of children—within a medieval literary courtly structure of loyalty to a king who will, in turn, honor and reward his obedient knights.¹³ Of course, here, as in the *Crucifixion*, this knightly identity becomes comically and troublingly inappropriate when placed in context with the ignoble violence the soldiers commit. Courtly language and titling cannot hide the fact that the soldiers of the slaughter and the crucifixion are participating in the highly dishonorable missions of child-murder and execution and not in demonstrations of knightly prowess or chivalry.

Nevertheless, however problematic the title of “knight” might be, it is a title the York soldiers claim for themselves. Throughout the *Crucifixion*, they talk of winning “worshippe” through their task, and this

11. Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 42.

12. Beadle, “The Slaughter of the Innocents,” in *The York Plays*, line 163.

13. While the English plays tend to portray Herod as a tyrant, nativity plays from France, Spain, Germany, and Italy more frequently present him as a gracious, courtly regal figure. See Miriam Skey, “Herod the Great in Medieval Drama,” *Comparative Drama* 13, no. 4 (1979–80): 330–64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41152856>.

aspiration is further reflected in the manner in which they introduce the tools with which they intend to complete it:

- III MILES And I haue gone for gere goode speede,
 Bothe hammeres and nayles large and lange.
IV MILES þanne may we boldely do þis dede.
 Commes on, late kille þis traitoure strange.
 (29-32)

The third soldier's emphasis upon the size of the nails is important. Indeed, modern cycle productions have found that oversized nails make the instruments of torture highly visible to the audience while providing the illusion that they support Christ's body.¹⁴ Yet the fact that this speech closely follows the first soldier's address of his companions as "knyghtis" suggests that the third soldier's description of the size and length of their "gere" is also making a wry reference to the descriptions of knightly weaponry in the romance genre—and specifically to the role of a knight's sword. As David Hay and many others have noted, the sword, shield, and spear were "common metaphors for masculinity and the phallus" and "employed to construct, define and signify gendered identities throughout the Middle Ages."¹⁵ However, while the third soldier's "nayles large and lange" parody the noble sword of the knightly romance (while calling into question the size of the soldier's own "sword" by replacing it with a "nail"—comparatively small and a tool of the working, not gentry, class), they also underline the difference between them.

A further irony is that the nails of the Crucifixion *were* popularly regarded as noble arms in the iconography of the Middle Ages, but it was Christ, not the soldiers, who was awarded symbolic representation

14. The large nails used in the 2012 production of the Mystery Cycle in York were approximately twenty centimeters long.

15. David Hay, "Arms and Armour," in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopaedia*, ed. Margaret C. Schaus (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 36-37. See also Karras, *From Boys to Men*, 20-65, and Richard W. Kaeuper on the function of violence and armor in chivalric narrative in "Chivalry and the 'Civilizing Process,'" in *Violence in Medieval Society*, ed. Richard W. Kaeuper (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000), 21-35.

as a “knight.” A reading of the nails as part of the *arma Christi* (the instruments of the Passion) goes some way to explaining the York play’s treatment of Christ’s body. Clifford Davidson and others have noted that, in the plays of the York realist, “iconography and realistic detail co-exist,” and the soldiers’ focus on their tools, rather than the body, associates their actions with a very specific type of iconographic practice.¹⁶ English devotional manuscripts bearing the instruments of the Passion as Christ’s “arms” often present a fragmented view of Christ’s body. For example, in several of the manuscripts containing the popular late fourteenth-century poem *Arma Christi*, episodes of the Passion are accompanied by illustrations of the torture instruments used.¹⁷ But while the text of the poem focuses on Christ’s suffering, in the illustrations his body is either absent or fragmented. Instead, precedence is given to the instruments, with particular attention laid upon the nails, which are magnified and as “large and lang” as those used by the soldiers of the York *Crucifixion*. This also occurs in medieval depictions of the *arma*. For example, in one fourteenth-century manuscript, the comparatively small image of the crucifixion is surrounded by images in which Christ’s body is fragmented by weapons signifying the tortures performed upon it. His thorn-crowned head and side wound are shown separately from the rest of his body, the effects of torture upon a human body threatening to disappear among the material instruments used to carry it out.¹⁸

In the York *Crucifixion*, we see a similar process at work through the staging of the soldiers hammering in their nails. Until it is raised,

16. Clifford Davidson, “The Realism of the York Realist and the York Passion,” *Speculum* 50, no. 2 (1975): 270–83, 271, doi: 10.2307/2852264.

17. See, for example, the fifteenth-century *Arma Christi* roll San Marino, Huntingdon Library, HM 26054, which contains a large illustration of the three nails. See also Russell Hope Robbins, “The ‘Arma Christi’ Rolls,” *Modern Language Review* 34, no. 3 (1939): 415–21, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3717702>, and Richard G. Newhauser and Arthur J. Russell, “Mapping Virtual Pilgrimage in an Early Fifteenth-Century *Arma Christi* Roll,” in *The Arma Christi in Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture*, ed. Lisa H. Cooper and Andrea Denny-Brown (Dorchester: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 83–113.

18. See London, British Library MS Royal 6.E VI, f.15.

it is likely that the cross would have been obscured by the bodies of the soldiers working on it, giving the audience only a partial view of Christ. The soldiers' vocal emphasis upon the nails would, however, have kept them fully in the minds of their audience, if not in view. This focus on the nails also results in the further fragmentation of Christ's body, as the soldiers divide up Christ's limbs:

- II MILES Nowe, certis, I schall no3t fyne
 Or his right hand be feste.
 III MILES þe lefte hande þanne is myne –
 Late see who beres hym beste.
 IV MILES Hys lymmys on lenghe þan schalle I lede,
 And even vnto þe bore þame bringe.
 I MILES Vnto his heede I schall take hede,
 And with myne hande helpe hym to hyng.
 (81-88)

The four soldiers partition Christ's body just as they later partition his clothes, and during this section Christ becomes two hands, a pair of feet, and a head. The audience's view of Christ thus mimics the *arma Christi* with the long nails in prominent view, but the body glimpsed only in part. As Bynum has argued, such fragmentations blur the distinction between body and object and "body becomes object, object becomes body."¹⁹

Yet even as the body of the York Christ is subjugated to the nails which divide his limbs—and if Christ has, to some extent, *become* his own arms—the nails also command the ability to fragment the assumed "knightly" identities of the soldiers who wield them. Anthony Bale's study of the depiction of Jewish characters in devotional literature has noted that books depicting the *arma Christi* usually feature a haggard and exaggerated picture of his persecutors. He notes that "in the *Arma Christi* the violent Jewish body moves across time, morality and disgust in order to construct medieval Christian identity."²⁰ The York

19. Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 101.

20. Anthony Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms, 1350-1500* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 152.

Crucifixion also dramatizes such movements across time in characterizing its soldiers. Thus, the New Testament soldiers who executed Christ are aligned with a company of medieval pinners, who carry out the execution with self-made tools more appropriate to their everyday trade than to chivalric action. The result is a tension between the medieval devotional idea of Christ-as-knight, the New Testament soldiers' aspirations of knighthood, the craft of the pinners, and the actual business in which they are engaged. Despite their language concerning the length of their nails and the fourth soldier's assertion that, fully equipped, they may "boldely do thise dede," the soldiers cannot overcome the fact that they are trying to verbally transform their nails into noble weapons for an ignoble task. These soldiers are not chivalric figures; indeed, they are not knights at all. They are makers of pins and executioners of Christ, and, as such, they bear different kinds of tools and partake in a different kind of masculine identity. Through their association with the popular medieval devotional culture surrounding the *arma Christi*, the nails rebel in the hands of their makers to underline the discrepancy between the soldiers' assumed knightly identity and their actual roles within the play.

The nails themselves, moreover, *do* hold noble and militaristic associations of their own, quite apart from their soldier bearers. Throughout the Middle Ages, the nails of Christ's crucifixion accrued a rich devotional and political narrative which was particularly invested in linking the nails with a crusading post-biblical history. This was disseminated through the widely popular legends of Saint Helena and her recovery of the true cross. Saint Helena was said to have used the nails of the cross in the helmet and bridle of her son, the emperor Constantine, thus contributing towards his military success.²¹ Such legends were often employed to confirm the authority of secular powers; for example, when another nail was said to form part of the fourteenth-century Iron Crown of Lombardy used to crown the kings of Italy.²² This suggests that, in emphasizing the importance of the nails, the York *Crucifixion* is

21. See the account of Helena's discovery of the Cross and use of the nails in Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 283.

22. See Barbara Baert, *A Heritage of Holy Wood: The Legend of the True Cross in Text and Image* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 350-406.

acknowledging their anachronic nature in order to, as Nagel and Wood argue, “lay a trail back to Europe’s multiple pasts, to the Holy Land, to Rome—monarchical, Republican, Imperial, Christian—and sometimes to Rome’s Byzantine legacy.”²³ This not only points to the nails’ (if not the soldiers’) own role in chivalric history, it identifies that history with the civic pride and trade of late medieval York.

In focusing on the nails and their historical associations, the York pinner were linking these multiple pasts into the regional concerns of their own time. Moreover, the nails, and the wounds they inflicted, held a particularly sensitive role within the religious and secular identities of late medieval York. The iconography of Christ’s wounds became politically charged during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and in 1405, York Archbishop Richard Scrope depicted them on his standard when he rebelled against Henry IV. Like the York Christ, Scrope was executed as a traitor, and subsequent attempts to canonize him reported his request to be struck five times in mimicry of Christ’s wounds. Pamela King notes that, as a consequence, Scrope “became firmly fixed in the Yorkist martyrology.”²⁴ It is therefore likely that the York *Crucifixion*, with its focus on the meeting of nail and flesh as the soldiers enthusiastically inflict the five wounds in front of their audience, was also making a daring reference to a local martyr. The longevity of the wounds as a symbol of Northern resistance was continued when the final fraught years of the York cycle’s performance saw Christ’s wounds adopted as emblems during the Northern rebellions of 1536 and 1569. As Clifford Davidson notes:

The Five Wounds thus tended to serve as an emblem which both identified allegiance to the Old Religion and signified the identification of the individual with the sufferings of Christ imaginatively and, in the case of Archbishop Scrope in 1405, literally at the time of his execution.²⁵

23. Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, 10.

24. Pamela M. King, “Contemporary Cultural Models for the Trial Plays in the York Cycle,” in *Drama and Community: People and Plays in Medieval Europe*, ed. Alan Hindley (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 215.

25. Clifford Davidson, “Suffering and the York Plays,” *Philological Quarterly* 81,

While the city of York did not itself join the Northern rebellions, the rebellion of 1569 coincided with the final performance of its mystery pageants. The meaning of the nails used within each performance of the cycle would have therefore altered as the York cycle progressed through increasingly divisive times. During the cycle's last years, the soldiers' relationship with their nails may have accrued associations which challenged the political climate of the play's own time.

The identification of the York soldiers as "knights," and their focused division of Christ's body into nailed sections therefore supports a political subtext in a city which used his wounds as an emblem of protest in a manner that simultaneously sustained an uncomfortable familiarity with the "quartering" of limbs reserved as a punishment for those deemed traitors. At their entrance, the soldiers state that their duty is to perform the will of their "lordis and leders of owre lawe" (4). In the biblical "time" of the crucifixion narrative, this indicates the Jewish and Roman authorities who have condemned Christ to death. Yet the characters' use of the collective "owre" encompasses the medieval York audience as well as the guildsmen performing as the soldiers. The crucifying soldiers are thus aligned with contemporary jurisdictional powers. This link between biblical and medieval justice and injustice is further consolidated by the fact that the final performance station of the York cycle was the Pavement: a space commonly used for public execution and punishment.²⁶ Through the play's engagement with the nails that produced politically and theologically loaded symbols, the distinctions between medieval civic time and New Testament time and between places of performance and places of punishment, are blurred.

Nevertheless, the potentially troublesome status of the nails as emblems of resistance is somewhat neutralized by the fact that, for the pinner performing in the play, nails were also everyday objects: working men's tools. Although the soldiers call each other knights, their enthusiasm concerning their nails' length and strength simultaneously presents four late medieval guildsmen promoting their trade. This pride in the nails permeates the pageant, albeit through evoking horror at the

no. 1 (2002): 18.

26. *Ibid.*, 6.

purpose to which they are put. For example, one soldier observes the sturdiness of his nails as they pierce Christ's flesh:

II MILES Yis, here is a stubbe will stiffely stande,
 Thurgh bones and senous it schall be soght.
 This werke is wele, I will warande.
 (102-5)

This speech operates as a kind of cinematic "zooming in" on the detail of the crucifixion by directing the audience's attention to the precise moment that the nail enters the flesh. This invests the second soldier's "stubbe" with a material agency which is placed in opposition with the passive, permeable sinews and bone through which it drives. This also performs a theological purpose. The organic matter of Christ's body continues to be malleable and transformable throughout devotional history (through being pierced and bleeding, through resurrection, and, later, through transubstantiation). Robert Mills has noted that the corporeal and gendered fluidity of Christ is characteristic of his representation on the cross:

Passion depictions position Christ's body in a zone of between-ness. . . . Christ's ambivalent, threshold status endows his body with representational ambiguity; in these moments of flux and instability, his gender refuses to signify monolithically.²⁷

However, while the nails pinning Christ to the cross also partake of the same "zone of between-ness," their substance and form is less ambiguous. In contrast to Christ's transforming, unstable body, the nails, by contrast, "stiffely stand"—sustaining their material, nail-like form even when re-presented, as Nagel and Wood argue, "for successive recipients."²⁸ As a consequence, while Christ's body *does* transform the materials of the cross through the fact of his presence on it, thereby making the ordinary wood and nails of a carpenter's trade into something

27 Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 191.

28. Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, 13.

extra-ordinary, it does not necessarily alter the *form* of these objects.²⁹ This is what gives the York nails their anachronic properties while allowing them meanings independent from the crucifixion narrative. This sense of the nail's material constancy coupled with its ability to change its meaning is reflected in the soldiers' following remark—"this werke is wele." This holds an element of comic ambiguity. The soldiers' "werke" of crucifixion is, of course, far from "wele," underlining the discrepancy noted earlier between the soldiers' desire for noble, proficient action and the dishonorable matter of their work.³⁰ However, the soldier may also be referring to the "stubbe"—itself a product of the pinner-actor's "werke," thus making this statement a legitimate, if rather crude, reference to the quality of his own workmanship.

This sense of the pinner-soldiers' pride in their work is reinforced when the third soldier boasts about the security of his workmanship as he attaches Christ to the Cross "full nemely with a nayle":

III MILES And I schall tacche hym too,
 Full nemely with a nayle.
 þis werke will holde, þat dar I heete,
 For nowe are feste faste both his hende.
 (119-22)

In asserting that their nails are good enough to crucify Christ, the pinner-makers are making a statement about their position within the guild community. First, the performance of the *Crucifixion* operates as a statement of the guild's importance as being deemed worthy to produce the moment at the heart of the cycle's salvation narrative. Records show that performances of the York cycle had the potential to be highly divisive, and a number of disputes occurred concerning which guilds

29. As opposed, for example, to the Old English poem "The Dream of the Rood," in which the cross is physically transformed and given a voice by the fact of Christ's presence on it.

30. See Davidson, "Suffering and the York Plays," 15, who notes that the soldiers are "very like workmen going about their work, as if that work were a normal occupation in medieval York."

should take precedence in the production of the plays.³¹ Yet while the play *does* operate as a statement of guild pride, it also works to diffuse any tension concerning their elevated role. This is chiefly done through the nails themselves. Their anachronic nature means that they resist performing as uncomplicated advertisements for the pinners' goods and the guild's precedence in York. There is a strong element of self-parody in the pinners' presentation of themselves as crucifiers, enabling them to mock both their task and their work while attesting to the solidity of their goods. As a result, while the nails prove strong, the soldiers' workmanship is highly dubious.

The soldiers initially take great pride in their work, and their repetitive references to "werke" and "werking" focus on the occupation itself rather than its outcome or theological importance:

II MILES Thanne to þis werke vs muste take heede
 So þat oure wirkyng be noght wronge.
 (25-26)

However, despite their attempt to treat the crucifixion as an everyday task, the soldiers are unable to collapse the time of the crucifixion into the medieval time of their own craft. Even their familiar handwrought nails hold temporal implications, which reach beyond the bounds of their pageant wagon or workshop. As a result, their speeches are unconsciously pertinent, pointing to the moral chasm between what, for the pinners, might be seen as "wronge" work and the inherent "wrongness" of the crucifixion of an innocent man. This culminates in a gradual disintegration of the soldiers' competency in their task. The work ethic established at the beginning of their task quickly fades as they find that the holes of the cross have not been bored in the correct places, and they must stretch Christ to fit. This admits the potential for some cross-guild banter, as the fourth soldier's remark "þis wereke is all vnmeete" (127) functions as a dig at the carpenters for their shoddy wood-boring. The soldiers then struggle to lift the cross into place and find that the

31. See Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 265-67.

hole is so large they must support it with pegs. By the end of the play, they are uncertain whether the job they have performed is “good” or “unthrifty.” The nails are the only strong element of a botched job; nevertheless, even they bear centuries of theological associations that work to undermine, rather than support, the soldiers’ initial pride in their guild’s workmanship. Just as the temporal resonances of the nails dismantled the soldiers’ identification with the role of knight, here they challenge their competency as craftsmen.

So far, I have demonstrated the ways in which the nails of the York *Crucifixion* temporally engage with, and dispute, two kinds of medieval male identity. However, when Christ speaks within the play, these identities become further complicated by being aligned with the theological contexts of the Old and New Testaments. Christ’s first speech occurs just after the soldiers have set out their tools ready to do their work. This speech reminds the audience of the crucifixion’s role within the history of salvation:

JESUS Almyghty God, my fadir free,
 Late þis materes be made in mynde:
 þou badde þat I sculde buxsome be
 For Adam plyght for to be pyned.
 Here to dede I obblisshe me
 Fro þat synne for to saue mankynde.
 (49-54)

Jesus’s prayer underlines the fact that all of the soldiers’ “werke”—along with his own suffering—answers the sin generated in the *Genesis* plays at the opening of the York cycle and at the opening of the Old Testament. In his reference to Adam, Christ not only situates the Crucifixion as Adam’s redemption, he also reminds the audience of Adam’s “plyght,” or punishment: all work, but especially the “werke” of the guildsmen-soldiers, is the consequence of the first sin. This provides a sobering reminder that the honor of the pinners’ guild being assigned the crucifixion is linked to their trade and that *all* trade points backwards to the Fall. The soldiers’ nails, by extension, therefore hold the paradoxical state of being signifiers of man’s fallen state and the means by which man

is redeemed. Yet the York Christ's prayer, "late þis materes be made in mynde," is also anticipatory; he speaks *beyond* the immediacy of his crucifixion and calls for the medieval (and, indeed, all subsequent) audiences to remember the Fall's causes and consequences. His desire to make "in mynde" a link between the late medieval performance of the crucifixion, the actual New Testament event, and its Old Testament cause, uses both the space and the objects of his performance as memorial devices. Just as the play's performance space at the Pavement was associated both with Christ's crucifixion and with the everyday punishment of criminals, so the York *Crucifixion* forges a mnemonic link between the pinners' trade (signified by the nails they bear) and the salvation narrative. As a consequence, the objects of the crucifixion become repositories of memory, linking the everyday items produced by the pinners with the history of sin and salvation.

This memorial link serves to glorify Christ at the expense of the pinners, and it is following this first speech that things begin to go wrong. The soldiers' work becomes increasingly incompetent, and the tools their own hands have created appear to resist them. The holes are bored in the wrong places; the cross is too slender for its hole; one soldier loses his hammer, only to be told that it is at his hand, and the soldiers are barely able to lift the cross into position (239-40). The heaviness of the York cross has long been associated with the spiritual weight of the sin carried by Jesus:

Christ "weyes a wikkid weght" because he bears the weight of the world's wickedness on the cross. He bears man's sin by proxy because men cannot bear it themselves. The struggle of the soldiers to lift the cross dramatizes the inability of even the best of men to bear such a distressing burden.³²

However, the weight of the cross also works to further destabilize the masculine identities being performed by the soldiers. The figures of the knight and the craftsman rely upon physical strength, dexterity, and skill. The fact that the soldiers now struggle with the labor of their task

32. Paul Willis, "The Weight of Sin in the York *Crucifixio*," *Leeds Studies in English* 15 (1984): 109-16, 110.

suggests that the act of crucifying Christ has physically weakened them and removed their mastery over their tools. This weakness is shown to be embarrassing as the third soldier berates his fellows by saying that four men should be adequate for the task:

III MILES Now, certis, I hope it schall noght nede
 To calle to vs more companye.
 Methynke we foure schulde do þis dede
 And bere hym to 3one hille on high.
 (169-72)

Their apparent weakness, and the third soldier's fear of calling in others to help, suggests that the heavy cross works to "un-man" the soldiers. This suggestion of physical weakness is consistent with other medieval imaginings of the persecutors of Christ, which often portrayed them as ugly, grotesque antimodels of masculinity.³³ It also reflects contemporary antisemitical narratives and images concerning the unmanliness of Jews who mocked and rejected Christ or his presence in the host. As Bale has noted, characterizations of Christ's persecutors as ugly, weak or Jewish associate the piercing Christ's body with an action that opposes violent, erring male bodies against passive, obedient ones: "By fantasising a malignant, assertive body (such as that of the Jewish murderer) and the passive virgin corpse, the active roles by which one 'became male' could be negated."³⁴ The idea that the York soldiers are, to some extent, performing "Jewish" identities is supported by the fact that they also appear to conform to the antisemitical stereotype of excessive literalism through their focus on the mechanics of their task rather than its spiritual meaning.³⁵ They treat their nails in the same way; primarily seeing

33. See, for example, Lisa Lampert's study of the feminized, corrupt Jewish body in Lisa Lampert, *Gender and Jewish Difference from Paul to Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

34. Bale, *Jew in the Medieval Book*, 129.

35. On "Jewish" literalism, see Gavin I. Langmuir, *History, Religion, and Antisemitism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990) and Joan Young Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews: Reflections of the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 171-203.

them as tools rather than acknowledging their more complex spiritual, social, and temporal roles. In this manner, and despite the soldiers' alignment with the medieval identities of knight and guildsmen, they also perform as the "Jewish" persecutors of Christ and, as such, not as "men" at all. As a consequence, the nails' significance as objects of torture (rather than as knightly weapons or emblems of trade) returns to the forefront of the play. The soldiers are further unmanned by the fact that the nails execute their role with a sufficiency that the actions of the soldiers cannot emulate. Ultimately both soldiers and nails, pinners and pins, creators and created objects, bear the extreme, sin-laden weight of Christ, yet only the pins remain strong. In this sense, it is *because* the nails remain strong that the men bearing them become weak.

When the cross is finally and clumsily jolted into position, the audience is invited to contemplate their own complicity in the performance of violent action in Christ's final, often-examined speech:

JESUS Al men þat walkis by waye or strete,
 Takes tente 3e schalle no trauayle tyne.
 Byholdes myn heede, myn handis, and my feete,
 And fully feele nowe, or 3e fyne,
 Yf any mournyng may be meete,
 Or myscheue mesured vnto myne.
 My fadir, þat alle bales may bete,
 Forgiffis þes men þat dois me pyne.
 What þei wirke wotte þai noght;
 Therfore, my fadir, I craue,
 Latte neuere þer synnys be sought,
 But see þer saules to saue.
 (253-64)

It is striking that Christ invites the audience to behold his head, hands, and feet and "fully feele" pity for his injuries—essentially echoing the soldiers' earlier partitioning of his limbs when they nailed him to the cross. It is almost as though the nails pinning Jesus to the cross are actually supporting an icon as well as the performing body of an actor. The materiality of the nails is thus extended to the materiality of Christ: a

speaking image lifted up before an audience.³⁶ We have come full circle, returning our focus to the wounded hands and feet. But now, we are offered the complete picture as the entire body is raised into view.

“What þei wirke wotte þai noht,” says Jesus of the soldiers who have crucified him, and he is right. The soldiers understand neither their work nor their own masculine identities nor their tools’ ability to engage with times beyond their immediate task. But while Christ’s speech deftly cuts across the time of the Crucifixion to the late medieval streets of York, he is also apparently unaware that he, too, is a “werke”—a product of the pinners’ own dramatic and commercial craft. Although the identity of Christ is in many ways placed in opposition to the identities of the soldiers, the two are nevertheless intimately connected by the nails holding Christ to the cross. The Christ of the York *Crucifixion* play is, like his nails, a work of the pinners’ craft, while the nails themselves provide the very reason that the pinners are granted the crafting of the *Crucifixion*. These reciprocal relationships between the various identities of the nails, Christ, and the soldiers are grounded in the nail’s anachronic properties. I therefore contend that the York nails prove so disruptive to the various gendered identities present in the *Crucifixion* because they are in many ways timeless, able to move between disconnected moments in time and resisting being confined to a singular physical presence in play or scripture. Yet they are also very much *of* time, subject to the needs of their makers, users, sufferers, and potential buyers; even as they project their own temporal expectations upon the men who wield and hang by them.

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36. See Isabel Davis’s discussion of the parchment-like quality of the York Christ’s skin. Davis, “Ye that pasen by þe Weiye,” 458–60. See also Caroline Walker Bynum’s identification of “a complex play of subject and material” in medieval crucifixion iconography. *Christian Materiality*, 82–83.